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ABSTRACT

Interpersonal communication and literature are two areas of knowledge that should be pursued together. Plays offer the opportunity to explore and to participate in the process of dialog. Some plays can also lead the viewer/reader/actor to introspection. "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee can be studied at once for its dramatic merit, historical allusions, and insights into self-awareness and communication. John Knowles' "A Separate Peace" can be a means of exploring Abraham Maslow's concepts of self-actualization and synergy. "The Grass Harp" offers some of Truman Capote's best language and imagery and merits study as literature. In addition, this short novel illustrates complex patterns of communication. The current popularity of science fiction and fantasy provides an opportunity to introduce students to excellent literature and to truths that are sometimes presented in mythical form. "Pygmalion" by George Bernard Shaw illustrates the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies. Judith Guest's "Ordinary People" explores the damage caused by needless guilt and further illustrates the idea that behavior is not dictated by events, but is a response to subjective perceptions of events. "At the Shorts" by Thomas Rogers explores the intrapersonal conflicts of adolescents and also offers insights into communication between sexes and within the family. Combining the studies of communication and literature allows human awareness and aesthetic insight to develop together. (HOD)

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BASICS COMBINED: UNDERSTANDING HUMAN COMMUNICATION THROUGH LITERATURE

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Basics Combined: Understanding Human Communication Through Literature

In recent years the study of interpersonal communication has often been included as a unit in secondary language arts, speech, and English courses. Classroom attention to human interaction may be cited as an affective frill by those who want to "go back" to basics. But those who believe that some basics were overlooked "back then" insist that developing healthy relationships is among our most basic needs. Instead of eliminating some basics to get back to others, possibly we can move forward to combinations of essential knowledge. Leo Buscaglia maintains that we should "learn everything together and nothing first."[1] Two areas of knowledge which can be pursued together are interpersonal communication and literature.

In his Nobel Acceptance Speech, William Faulkner called for literature which addresses "the old truths and verities."[2] He believed the writer's first task is to write of the human spirit. Literature which explores the old truths about human life pursues a quest both basic and constantly relevant. Nor is it necessary to seek out obscure psychological fiction, for the best writers inevitably explore the experiences of people in contact and conflict.

Plays offer the opportunity to explore the process of dialogue, and to participate in it. Some plays can also lead the viewer/reader/actor to introspection. The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee can be studied at once for its dramatic merit, its historical allusions, and its insights into self-awareness and communication.[3]

Thoreau's commitment to conscience raises many questions about personal choices and social consequences, and leads naturally into classroom experiences in values clarification. Often using language drawn directly from Walden, the play touches universal aspects of human relationships--including influence, risk, friendship, and loss. In its evocation of Henry David Thoreau, his brother John, the woman they both love, and Ralph Waldo Emerson--the play explores themes that Faulkner expected from literature: "compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

John Knowles' A Separate Peace is already studied in many secondary English classes as a work of literature.[4] It can also be a means of exploring Abraham Maslow's concepts of self-actualization and synergy.[5] The character of Phineas illustrates creativity, spontaneity, and a sense of mission--three of Maslow's criteria for self-actualization. The remaining two criteria (low self-conflict and a clear perception of reality) are less easily applied to Phineas. But an exceptional person, by definition, eludes quick analysis. The challenge to understand Finny's separate reality raises vital questions of human differences and human capacities. Maslow's concept of synergy, in which two people are enlarged by each other's presence, is also illustrated by Knowles' portrayal of Gene and Phineas. Their example of synergy can be a basis for discussing the tension between selfishness and altruism--a discussion which can range from theoretical concepts of Ayn Rand to practical problems of student competition.[6] A Separate Peace affirms the possibility of winners without losers, and suggests that human links can create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Grass Harp offers some of Truman Capote's best language and imagery, and merits study as literature.[7] In addition, this short novel

illustrates complex patterns of communication. The unhealthy dependence between two sisters is transformed by crisis into a stronger inter-dependence. Also, the narrator, writing in retrospect, conveys the continuing importance of childhood influences and the part they play in forming self-identity. The characters in the story illustrate both nonconformity and a need for community--and show both are possible through unconditional acceptance (an idea which can be related to the theories of Carl Rogers).[8] Perhaps the story's most important insight is that human relationships are a process, and that communication has no clear beginning nor ending. The judge in the novel could be describing the helix communication model when he says:

> A leaf, a handful of seed--begin with these, learn a little of what it is to love. First, a leaf, a fall of rain, then someone to receive what a leaf has taught you, what a fall of rain has ripened. No easy process, understand; it could take a life-time, it has mine, and still I've never mastered it--I only know how true it is: that love is a chain of love, as nature is a chain of life.[9]

The current popularity of science fiction and fantasy provides an opportunity to introduce students to excellent literature, and to truths that are sometimes presented in mythical form. In "Tomorrow's Child," Ray Bradbury makes the essential point that sacrifice is the highest human act.[10] In this story a child is born into the wrong dimension and is shaped as a pyramid. In order to relate to their son, the parents elect to cross into his dimension--becoming a rectangle and an oblong. Illustrating the essence of heroism, these parents sacrifice their human forms, but--in so doing--affirm their humanness. Conversely, George Orwell's 1984 can be a means of showing that betrayal is the most destructive human act.[11] In a world of gross oppression, the two lovers keep their

spirits intact until they make the ultimate mistake--betrayal of each other.

The preceding examples are drawn from the vast range of literature which can be related to the study of communication. The list of possibilities is nearly inexhaustible. Pygmalion by George Bernard Shaw illustrates the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies.[12] Judith Guest's Ordinary People explores the damage caused by needless guilt; it further illustrates Albert Ellis' idea that behavior is not dictated by events, but is a response to subjective perceptions of events.[13] Vanities by Jack Heifner illustrates and questions the rigid social divisions among high school students. The relevance of this play is enhanced when related to Ralph Keyes' Is There Life After High School?[14] Willa Cather's "Old Mrs. Harris" raises important issues about family relationships and communication with the elderly.[15] Sherwood Anderson's "Hands" explores the destructiveness of labeling and prejudice.[16] Pearl Buck's "The Lesson" distinguishes well between attempts to change people and the more lasting influence which comes from example.[17] Tim by Colleen McCullough challenges stereotypes of age and retardedness and questions the norms which separate people.[18] At the Shores by Thomas Rogers explores the intrapersonal conflicts of adolescence, and also offers insights into communication between sexes and within the family.[19]

Abraham Maslow identifies self-esteem, love, and belongingness among the basic needs of all people. Beyond the basic needs are the growth needs, including the desire for beauty, truth, and order. While categorizing basic and growth needs differently, Maslow acknowledges they cannot really be separated--for aesthetic appreciation is interwoven with

self-worth.[20] A person who can recognize beauty and truth in literature is satisfying an aesthetic need, but is also confronting the fundamental nature of his/her humanness.

Within the language arts classroom it is possible to address the basic need for human relationship while simultaneously awakening growth needs through exposure to fine literature. By combining the studies of communication and literature, human awareness and aesthetic insight can develop together. And by serving two purposes at once, more time is left to go back--or forward--to other basics.

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